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Chile

Human Rights Issue

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Reports of gross violations of human rights in Chile, which had nearly ceased this year, are again on the rise.

The Pinochet government is reverting to practices that have jeopardized its international standing since the 1973 coup.

This backsliding comes at a particularly bad time for Chile, since a number of West European governments have begun to acknowledge improvement in the Chilean human rights situation. Critics will now have additional ammunition for their attacks on the Chilean regime and their appeals to boycott it.

Chile's National Intelligence Directorate is apparently behind the recent increase in torture, illegal detentions, and so-called "disappearances." The directorate's chief, Colonel Manuel Contreras, is a close confidant of Pinochet, who acclaimed the organization in a recent press interview for its "decisive role" in bringing extremism under control. Contreras answers directly to the President, and it is widely known that he would act without the knowledge and approval of his superior.

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Chile...

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Most of the targets now appear to be Socialists, but some Communists and Christian Democrats are also victims. A campaign against Communist Party leaders last year largely immobilized that organization, and the security services are apparently turning to other opponents.

The intelligence directorate is disregarding government decrees intended to protect individual rights.

The directorate's detention facility at Cueto Alamos is said to be in operation again. This site was largely abandoned after a decree in January 1976 empowered the supreme court president and the interior minister to inspect—without prior notice—areas suspected of being used for torture. Neither official appears to have exercised this authority since last year.

Pinochet stated this week that the emergency measures in effect under the state of siege will be enforced as long as necessary "to repress drastically any attempt that might become a threat to internal security or domestic peace." Following his recent crackdown on former president Frei's Christian Democratic Party and on outspoken democratic labor leaders, Pinochet has made clear that he will move harshly against anyone who runs afoul of his government.

The President may believe that the cutoff in US aid has made human rights a dead issue in Chile and that Washington has no further leverage against his regime. He may also be buoyed by the gradual improvement in the country's economic situation. In any case, reports of increased repression are sure to leak out, refueling the human rights controversy.

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